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THE WORKMANSHIP OF "MACBETH"—II

BY SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

I

IN my previous essay I discussed the essential meaning of Witchcraft; which subscribes to a total perversion of moral order, accepting evil for its good, Satan for its God. We of a later age may find this perversion frantic when put into practice by monarchs and statesmen, a vapid imposture when professed by ignorant old women: and the old women no longer terrify us. Civilized men have made *that* advance. But we still listen to philosophers who preach the infernal doctrine, wearing beards—

You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid us to interpret
That you are so.

"You see, my friend," says Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World*, "there is nothing so ridiculous that has not at some time been said by some philosopher." Nor can a generation which has lived from the Ems telegram to 1914 and played meanwhile with the variously infamous writings of Nietzsche, Nordau, Bernhardi, maintain that the dream of winning all things by substituting evil for good has lost all power to hallucinate the intellect, even the strong intellect.

At any rate, the mass of Elizabethans, for whom Shakespeare wrote, firmly believed that old women could subscribe to this devil's doctrine, and could impress it upon their betters; and no one who has studied (or felt) the subtle whisperings of superstition will doubt that, of the audience in the Globe Theater, a majority even of those few who scoffed at witchcraft would be haunted by a fear that, after all, "there might be something in it," as we say.

So let us return to the *Chronicle* from which Shakespeare

drew his story. Holinshed relates that Macbeth and Banquo "went sporting by the way together, without any companies save only themselves, passing the roades and fieldes, when sodenly, in the middes of a launde, there met them 3 women in strange and ferly apparell, resembling creatures of an elder world"; and he adds that by common opinion these women "were eyther the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) ye Goddesses of destinee, or else some Nymphes or Faeries."

Now here (I make bold to say) is a passage upon which any man skilled in imaginative writing would seize by instinct and at once. But there is no need to labor the point that Shakespeare would *probably* have seized on it; since we know that, in fact, he did.

None the less it may be worth while suggesting how the mind of a practical dramatist would operate. Let me guess, therefore, that his mind would work somewhat in this way. He would say to himself, "I have to handle a murder; which is, by its nature, a deed of darkness. Here to my hand is a passage which—whether I can find or not in it the motive of my drama—already drapes it in the supernatural, and so in mystery—which is next door to darkness."

II

Let us remind ourselves how constantly Shakespeare uses darkness to aid the effect of his tragedies upon the spectator. In "Romeo and Juliet," his first, the tragic action really starts under a moonlit balcony and ends in a vaulted tomb. Of the four tragedies by general consent preferred as greatest, "Hamlet" opens on the dark battlements of Elsinore, with a colloquy in whispers, such as night constrains, between sentinels who report a ghost visiting their watch; "Othello" opens with the mutter of voices in a dark street, and ends by a bedside lit by one candle; the total impression of Lear is of a dark heath upon which three or four men wander blindly, lit only at intervals by flashes from the dark elements; and the physical blindness of Kent (the one morally sane character in the piece) enhances our sense of impotent moral groping. On "Macbeth" I cannot do better than quote Dr. Bradley:

Darkness, we may even say blackness, broods over this tragedy. It is remarkable that almost all the scenes which at once recur to the memory take place either at night or in some dark spot. The vision of the dagger, the

murder of Duncan, the murder of Banquo, the sleep-walking of Lady Macbeth, all come in night-scenes. The witches dance in the thick air of a storm, or "black and midnight hags" receive Macbeth in a cavern. The blackness of night is to the hero a thing of fear, even of horror; and that which he feels becomes the spirit of the play. The faint glimmerings of the western sky at twilight are here menacing: it is the hour when the traveler hastens to reach safety in his inn, and when Banquo rides homeward to meet his assassins: the hour when "light thickens," when "night's black agents to their prey do rouse," when the wolf begins to howl, and the owl to scream, and withered murder steals forth to his work. Macbeth bids the stars hide their fires that his "black" desires may be concealed; Lady Macbeth calls on thick night to come, palled in the dunnest smoke of hell. The moon is down and no stars shine when Banquo, dreading the dreams of the coming night, goes unwillingly to bed, and leaves Macbeth to wait for the summons of the little bell. When the next day should dawn, its light is "strangled" and "darkness does the face of earth entomb." In the whole drama the sun seems to shine only twice: first, in the beautiful but ironical passage where Duncan sees the swallows flitting round the castle of death; and afterwards, when at the close the avenging army gathers to rid the earth of its shame. Of the many slighter touches which deepen this effect I notice only one. The failure of nature in Lady Macbeth is marked by her fear of darkness; "she has light by her continually." And in the one phrase of fear that escapes her lips even in sleep, it is of the darkness of the place of torment that she speaks."

"Hell is murky." Yes, and upon the crucial test of the guilty king's soul in "Hamlet"—the play-scene—what is the cry?

KING: Give me some light—away!

ALL: Lights, lights, lights!

What, again, is the scene that gives quality to "Julius Cæsar" but the brooding night in Brutus's garden? What, again (to go back among the plays), retrieves "The Merchant of Venice" from tragedy—from the surcharged air of the trial scene—to comedy but the Fifth Act, with placid night shimmering toward dawn, and the birds starting to sing in the shrubberies as Portia, mistress of the house and the play, says in four words what concludes all—

"It is almost morning."

It may well be that Shakespeare, as a stage-manager, had means of employing darkness at will, say by a curtain pulled overhead across the auditorium, or part of it. If he had not (and the first account of the play by a spectator is by one Dr. Forman, an astrologist, who paid for his seat in the Globe on Saturday, April 20th, 1610—that is, at a time of year when the sky over the theater would be day-lit),

I frankly confess my ignorance of how it was managed. But that Shakespeare saw the play in darkness, no one who has studied it can have any doubt at all.

He *saw* the whole thing in darkness, or at best in the murk light of the Scottish highlands. He saw it (as the play proves) a thing of night. Now, always and everlastingly, among men, as day typifies sight and sanity, night typifies blindness and evil. In the night-time murder stalks, witches ride; men doubt of God in their dreams—doubt even, lying awake—and wait for dawn to bring reassurance.

In darkness—in a horror of darkness only—can one mistake and follow evil for good.

III

So, as I reason, Shakespeare saw his chance. I am weary of commentators who dispute whether his witches were real witches or fates, or what-not. Schiller, as we know, adapted "Macbeth"; and Schiller was a poet; but Schiller was no Shakespeare, and by philosophizing Shakespeare's witches, as by other means, he produced a "Macbeth" remarkably unlike Shakespeare's "Macbeth." When he came to the knocking at the gate, Schiller omitted the Porter—in deference (I believe) to the genteel taste of his age—and substituted a Watchman, with a song to the rising dawn; and a charming song, too, with the one drawback that it ruins the great dramatic moment of the play. Schlegel rates Schiller roundly for his witches; and Gervinus says that Schlegel's censure is not a whit too harsh. But Schlegel proceeds to evolve out of his inner consciousness a new kind of witch of his own; whereupon starts up Gervinus, and says that Schlegel "gives throughout an opposite idea of Shakespeare's meaning"; and forthwith proceeds in his turn to evolve *his* camel, having started off with the observation that "the poet, in the actual text of the play, calls these beings *witches* only derogatorily: they call themselves *weird sisters*." Profoundly true!—and has any one, by the way, ever known a usurer who called himself a usurer? or a pandar who called himself a pandar? or a swindler who called himself anything but "a victim of circumstances"? A few days ago, some enterprising firm sent me a letter which began (as I thought with gratuitous abruptness), "We are not money-lenders"—and went on to suggest that if, however, I should need "temporary financial ac-

commodation," they were prepared to advance any sum between £5 and £50,000.

As everybody knows who has studied the etiquette of traffic with Satan, it is the rule never to mention the real name. If Professor Gervinus had never, to ponder it, studied the tale of *Rumpelstilzkin*, he might at any rate have remembered the answer given to Macbeth's salutation and the answer in Act IV, Scene 1:

MACBETH: How now, you secret, black and midnight hags!
What is't you do?

ALL: A deed without a name.

And if the deed be nameless, why not the doer? But when a lady wears a beard on her chin, and sails to Aleppo in a sieve, and sits at midnight boiling a *ragoût* of poisoned entrails, newt's eye, frog's toe, liver of blaspheming Jew, nose of Turk and Tartar's lips, finger of birth-strangled babe, to make a gruel thick and slab for a charm of powerful trouble—if any one insist on my giving that lady a name, I am content with that printed in the stage-direction, and to call her "witch."

But if these philosophizing critics would leave their talk about Northern Fates, Nores, Valkyries—beings of which it is even possible that, save for the hint in Holinshed, Shakespeare had never heard, and certain that not one in ten of the Globe audience had ever heard—and would turn their learned attention to what Shakespeare as a workman *had to do*, could they miss seeing that a part of his very secret of success lay in leaving these creatures vague, the full extent of their influence dreadfully indeterminate? Coleridge on this, as not seldom, has the right word:

The Weird Sisters are as true a creation of Shakespeare's as his Ariel and Caliban—fates, furies, and materializing witches being the *elements*. They are wholly different from any representation of witches in the contemporary writers, and yet presented a sufficient external resemblance to the creatures of vulgar prejudice to act immediately on the audience. Their character consists in the imaginative disconnected from the good; they are the shadowy obscure and fearfully anomalous of physical nature, the lawless of human nature—elemental avengers without sex or kin.

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

I will put it in another way. Suppose that Shakespeare as a workman had never improved on what Marlowe taught. Suppose, having to make Macbeth choose evil for good, he

had introduced Satan, definite, incarnate, as Marlowe did: suppose he had made the man assign his soul, by deed of gift, on a piece of parchment and sign it with his blood, as Marlowe made Faustus do. What sort of play would "Macbeth" be?

But we know, and Shakespeare has helped to teach us, that the very soul of horror lies in the vague, the impalpable: that nothing in the world or out of it can so daunt and cow us as the dread of *we know not what*. Of darkness, again—of such darkness as this tragedy is cast in—that its menace lies in *suggestion* of the hooded eye watching us, the hand feeling to clutch us by the hair. No, Shakespeare knew what he was about when he left his witches vague.

Can we not see that very vagueness operating on Macbeth's soul? For a certainty, standing near in succession to the throne, he has (before ever the action begins) let his mind run on his chances. We need not say, with Coleridge, that "he who wishes a temporal end for itself does in truth will the means," but at least Macbeth has let his mind toy with the means. He has been on the stage scarce two minutes when, at the Third Witch's salutation—"All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!"—he starts, "betrayed by what is false within." Says Banquo:

Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair?

If we read and ponder Macbeth's letter to his wife: if we read and ponder what they say—and *omit* to say—when she greets his return, we see beyond shadow of doubt that certain things are understood between them. They had talked of the chance, even if, until this moment, they had forborne to speak of the way of it. These are things which, until the necessary moment arrives—the moment that summons action, now or never—cannot be uttered aloud, even between husband and wife.

Let us pause here, on the brink of the deed, and summarize:

(1) Shakespeare, as artificer of this play, meant the Witches with their suggestions to be of capital importance.

(2) Shakespeare, as a workman, purposely left vague the extent of their influence; purposely left vague the proportions their influence and Macbeth's own guilty promptings,

his own acceptance of the hallucination, contribute to persuade him; vague as the penumbra about him in which—for he is a man of imagination—he sees that visionary dagger. For (let us remember) it is not on Macbeth alone that this horrible dubiety has to be produced; but on us also, seated in the audience. We see what he does not, and yearn to warn him; but we also see what he sees—Banquo's ghost, for example—and understand why he doubts.

(3) As witchcraft implies a direct reversal of the moral order, so the sight and remembrance of the witches, with the strange fulfilment of the Second Witch's prophecy, constantly impose the hallucination upon him—"Fair is foul, and foul is fair." "Evil, be thou my good."

And now mark the daring of the great workman. So far he has carefully piled up shadows, doubts, darkness, half-meanings upon the distraught mind of Macbeth. Suddenly he confronts him with a will that has no doubts at all, but is all for evil: this in his wife, his "dearest partner of greatness." She, poor soul, is to suffer hereafter; but for the moment she sees the way—which is the evil way—with absolute conviction. May I, without undue levity, illustrate her clearness of purpose by this comparison?

DEAREST EMMA [wrote a young lady], you will congratulate me when I tell you that Papa has this morning been offered the Bishopric of ——. It was quite unexpected. He is even now in the library, asking for guidance. Dear Mamma is up-stairs, packing.

IV

So before the First Act closes—for actually, though our reluctant horror drags upon it, the action moves with a curious rapidity—the hallucination is established, the scene is set, and we behold this man and this woman groping to certain doom. So cunningly has Shakespeare, to heighten our interest in these, flattened down the other figures in the drama that none of them (if you will think of it) really matters to us. Duncan's murder matters, but not Duncan. He sleeps, and anon after life's fitful fever he is to sleep well; but the only fever *we* feel burns or shivers in that tremendous pair. The thick walls of Inverness Castle fence in the stealthy, damnable work. The gate is closed, barred. Around and outside broods darkness, yet even this is aware of something monstrous at work within. An owl screams: "there's husbandry in heaven": the stars, "as troubled

by man's act," dare but peer through it as through slits in a covering blanket; in the stables the horses catch a panic and gnaw one another's flesh in their madness. For within, up the stair, past the snoring grooms, a murderer creeps to his deed, a woman prompting. In part, no doubt—mostly, if you will—themselves have betrayed themselves; but the powers of evil have their way and reign in that horrible house.

So! and so—when it is done—as Lady Macbeth takes the dagger and Macbeth still stares at his bloody hands, the hour strikes, and the word is spoken.

What word? It is the critical word of the drama; and yet no voice utters it. As befits the inhuman, impalpable, inclosing darkness, it is no articulate word at all. What is it?

It is this: *Knock! knock! knock! knock!*

A knocking at the gate—but *who* knocks? Can we suppose it is Macduff or Lennox, or any silly actor in a highland kilt? Who cares more than a farthing for Macduff? Who cares even less than a farthing for Lennox?

Then *who* is it—or, shall we say, *what* is it—stands without, on the other side of the gate, in the breaking dawn, clamoring to be admitted? What hand is on the hammer? Whose step on the threshold?

It is, if we will, God. It is, if we will, the Moral Order. It is, whatever be our religion, that which holds humankind together by law of sanity and righteousness. It is all that these two have outraged. It is daylight, revealing things as they are and evil different from good. It is—whatever you will, it is the tread of vengeance—*pede claudo*, the knock that shatters illusion. Macbeth is king, or is to be. But that knock insists on what his soul now begins to know, too surely. Evil is *not* good; and from this moment the moral order asserts itself to roll back the crime to its last expiation.

Knock, knock! "Here's a knocking indeed!" growls the Porter as he tumbles out. "If a man were porter of hell-gate he should have old turning the key. . . ." Aye, my good fellow; and that is precisely what you are!

V

Embedded in the works of De Quincey, like a prize in a bran-pie, there is to be found a little paper six pages long,

and prolix at that, which contains the last word of criticism on this knocking at the gate.

De Quincey starts by confessing that "from his boyish days" this knocking produced an effect on his mind for which he could never account. "The effect was, that it reflected back upon the murderer a peculiar awfulness and depth of solemnity." He goes on to tell us (as he told us elsewhere, in his "Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts") how in the dreadful business of the murders in the Ratcliffe Highway—a series of crimes so fiendish that nothing like them again thrilled London until the days of Jack the Ripper—there did actually happen what the genius of Shakespeare had invented two hundred years before. The murderer, one Williams, who had entered the house of the Marrs and locked the door behind him, was startled, right on the close of his bloody work, as he had butchered the last member of the family, by the knocking of a poor little servant-girl, the Marrs' maid-of-all-work, who had been sent out on an errand. De Quincey draws a wonderful picture of these two, one on either side of that thin street door, breathing close and listening, the little maid on the pavement, the stealthy devil in the passage, with his hand on the key, which, mercifully, he did not turn.

[Here be it noted, in parenthesis, how fashionable this effect of the closed door has since become with dramatists. If we study Maeterlinck, for example, we shall find it his one master-trick. It is the whole secret of *L'Intruse*, of *La Mort de Tintageles*—the door with something dark, uncanny, foreboded, something that means doom, on the other side. Maeterlinck has variants, to be sure. In *Les Aveugles* he makes it the shutter of physical darkness in a company of old people, all blind. Sometimes, as in *L'Intérieur* and *Les Sept Princesses*, he rarefies the partition to a glass screen through which one set of characters, held powerless to interfere, watches another set, unconscious of observation. But in one way or another, always the dramatic effect hangs on our sense of this barrier, whether impalpable or solid, whether transparent as glass or dense as a door of oak, locked, bolted, barred.]

Let De Quincey go on. In what happened to the Marrs' murderer he says he found the solution of what had always puzzled him—the effect wrought on his feelings by the knocking in "Macbeth." A murderer—even such a mur-

derer as a poet will condescend to—exhibits human nature in its most abject and humiliating attitude. Yet if, as in "Macbeth," the murder is to be the protagonist, upon him our interest *must* be thrown. But how?

If the reader has ever witnessed a wife, daughter, or sister in a fainting-fit, he may chance to have observed that the most affecting moment in such a spectacle is that in which a sigh and a stirring announce the recommencement of suspended life. Or, if the reader has ever been present in a vast metropolis on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave, and, chancing to walk near the course through which it passed, has felt powerfully in the silence and desertion of the streets, and in the stagnation of ordinary business, the deep interest which at that moment was possessing the heart of man—if, all at once, he should hear the death-like stillness broken up by the sound of wheels rattling away from the scene, and making known that the transitory vision was dissolved, he will be aware that at no moment was his sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns so full and affecting as at that moment when the suspension ceases and the goings on of human life are suddenly resumed. All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible, by reaction. Now apply this to the case in "Macbeth." Here . . . the retiring of the human heart, and the entrance of the fiendish heart, was to be expressed and made sensible. Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human beings, human purposes, human desires. Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed. But how shall this be conveyed and made palpable? In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers and the murder must be isolated—cut off by an immeasurable gulf from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs—locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid aside—tranced—racked into a dread armistice. [Time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion.] Hence it is that when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds, the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.

There are critics who find the Porter's humor offensive and irrelevant: who complain that it is a low humor and ordinary. For answer (if answer be seriously required) I would refer them to "Hamlet," and invite them to explain why Hamlet, after agonizing colloquy with his father's ghost, should break out into shouting back on it, "Art thou

there, true-penny?"; "Well said, old mole!" and swearing his comrades to secrecy upon the profound remark that

There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark
But he's an arrant knave.

This is the laughter in which surcharged hysteria breaks and expends itself.

The Porter's speech is just such a discharge, vicarious, of the spectator's overwrought emotion; and it is quite accurately cast into low, every-day language, because that which knocks at the gate is not any dark, terrific doom—for all the darkness, all the terror, is cooped within—but the sane, clear, broad, ordinary, common, workaday order of the world reasserting itself, and none the more relentingly for being workaday, and common, and ordinary, and broad, clear, sane.

VI

We perceive, then, with how right an artistry Shakespeare throws all the effect of this knocking upon the souls *within*. Suppose an inferior artist at work upon the theme. Suppose that he sets the scene on the outside of the door. Suppose Macduff and Lennox to arrive in the dawn, after the night of tempest, and to stand there—Macduff with his hand on the knocker, the pair chatting lightly before they ask admission. That were a "situation" with no little of tragic irony in it, since we, the spectators, know upon what they are to knock. Suppose the door to open upon a sudden cry and the sight of Duncan's body borne down by his sons into the daylight of the courtyard. That were a "situation" indeed—yet how flat in comparison with Shakespeare's!

We may note a special reason, too, why it would have been flat; for this also illustrates workmanship. It is that, excepting only Banquo (and we are to talk of Banquo), Shakespeare has deliberately flattened down every other character to throw up Macbeth and Lady Macbeth into high relief. For why? Because he had, against odds, to interest us in them, and only in them. As I have said, nobody cares more than a farthing for Macduff or for Lennox. Says Dr. Bradley of the Macduffs:

Neither they, nor Duncan, nor Malcolm, nor even Banquo himself, has been imagined intensely, and therefore they do not produce that sense of

unique personality which Shakespeare could convey in a much smaller number of lines than he gives to most of them. And this is, of course, even more the case with persons like Ross, Angus, and Lennox, though each of these has distinguishable features. I doubt if any other great play of Shakespeare's contains so many speeches which a student of the play, if they were quoted to him, would be puzzled to assign to the speakers. Let the reader turn, for instance, to the Second Scene of the Fifth Act, and ask himself why the names of the persons should not be interchanged in all the ways mathematically possible.

To be sure they could. Because Shakespeare was taking good care all the time that not one of these should engage our interest, to compete in it for one moment with the two great figures of guilt in whom he had so jealously to keep us absorbed.

In this "flattening-down" (as I call it) of the virtuous characters in "Macbeth" Shakespeare played a stroke which seems worth examining as a stroke of workmanship. The Elizabethan stage, as we know, had not a straight-drawn front with footlights, but threw forward from its broad platform a sort of horn upon the auditorium. Along the narrowed platform a player who had some specially fine passage to spout advanced, and began, laying his hand to his heart--

All the world's a stage . . .

or,

The quality of mercy is not strained . . .

or (raising his hand to his brow),

To be, or not to be, that is the question—

and, having delivered himself, pressed his hand to his heart again, bowed to the discriminating applause, and retired into the frame of the drama. An Elizabethan audience loved these displays of conscious rhetoric, and in most of his plays Shakespeare is careful to provide opportunities for them. But you will hardly find any in "Macbeth." Here, by flattening the virtuous characters almost to figures on tapestry, Shakespeare flattened back his whole stage. Obviously, neither Macbeth nor his lady, with their known antecedents, were the kind of persons to stalk forward and spout virtue; and the virtuous receive no chance, because virtue has all the while to be kept uninteresting.

Moreover, this flattening of the virtuous characters gives "Macbeth" (already Greek in its simplicity of plot) a

curious resemblance to Greek tragedy in its sense of fatality. I repeat that nobody can care more than a farthing for Macduff on his own account. He had, to be sure, an unusual start in the world; but he has not quite lived up to it. His escape, which leaves his wife and children at Macbeth's mercy, is (to say the least) unheroic. Here, again, I suggest that Shakespeare's workmanship was sure. By effecting Macbeth's discomfiture through such men of straw, he impresses on us the conviction—or, rather, he leaves us no room for anything but the conviction—that Heaven is at work in retribution, and the process of its retribution is made the more imposing as its agents are seen in themselves to be naught.

ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH.

(To be Concluded)